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INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LILONGWE 000646

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/09/2018

TAGS: PGOV MI

SUBJECT: MALAWI: TEMBO TELLS AMBASSADOR "I'VE CHANGED"

REF: LILONGWE 630

Classified By: Ambassador Peter Bodde for Reasons 1.4 b, d

¶1. (C) Summary: During a Nov. 4 meeting with Ambassador Bodde, Malawi Congress Party (MCP) presidential candidate John Tembo claimed he and his party had changed since Malawi's one-party state era. Ironically, Tembo's comments came just two days after Tembo ran unopposed at the MCP's national convention. Rebranding himself as a defender of democracy, Tembo said he would fight for rule of law, and for free and fair elections. He maligned the recent trend of power sharing in Southern Africa, calling the arrangements a "gimmick for those who won't yield power" and promised to follow the wishes of the people. Regarding his upcoming campaign, Tembo explained that food security remained the top priority. While he fully supports Malawi's current agricultural input subsidies, Tembo wants to make them universal and less prone to manipulation by government. Additionally, he said Malawi must harness its water resources, improve education, and create jobs in urban centers to truly develop. Tembo said he would look to the rapidly-developing nations of India and China as models for growth. Comment: Given the history of Tembo and the MCP, it will take more than just words to convince voters outside the central region that the leopard has changed its spots. Tembo's actions over the past four years do not support his claims of reform.

Tembo: "I Have Changed"

¶2. (C) In a recent meeting with Ambassador, MCP leader and presidential candidate John Tembo proudly claimed he and his party had changed. Tembo, who still wears a lapel pin bearing the photo of former dictator and party founder Kamuzu Banda, said that he has always followed the will of the people and his party was now a defender of democracy in Malawi. He cited the MCP's expanding national base, focus on youths, and rising number of female parliamentary aspirants as evidence of the changes. Tembo, who previously described President Mutharika as a dictator to emboffs, said he would not settle for development without respect for the rule of law. He was particularly concerned with the executive's ability to prevent the legislature from meeting and promised to restore balance to the three branches of government. Tembo's comments to the Ambassador came a mere two days after cursory attempts failed to find someone to oppose him for the party's top spot at the MCP national convention.

¶3. (C) Ambassador queried Tembo regarding his campaign plans, but Tembo was coy, claiming that Mutharika had a history of stealing his ideas. However, he said he will defend democracy, call for rule of law, and push for free and fair elections on the campaign trail. Moreover, Tembo stated he would continue to break down regionalism in the country and if elected he would reverse Mutharika's favoritism of the southern region for government posts and development projects. Tembo blamed government manipulation of election results in 2004 for the continued appearance of only central region support for the MCP, and said the party had delegates

from "Chitipa to Nsanje" at its convention. Tembo strongly supported Ambassador's suggestion that a civil-society parallel vote tally similar to the system used in the Zimbabwe elections could minimize the potential for vote manipulation. (Comment: Tembo believes he won the 2004 presidential election and that only rigging by former president Muluzi put Mutharika into office.) He also maligned the recent trend of power sharing following elections in Africa, calling the arrangements a "gimmick for those who won't yield power" and promised to follow the wishes of the people.

Food Still the Measure of Success

¶4. (C) Ambassador asked Tembo about Malawi's much-lauded fertilizer subsidy program and if it would be an issue in the upcoming election. Tembo responded that food security remained the measure of success for politicians in Malawi. Tembo, who previously claimed the idea of a fertilizer subsidy as his own, said he fully supports the subsidy, but insisted the distribution system must be changed. He will campaign for a universal subsidy that will not be prone to political manipulation.

¶5. (C) Tembo maintained that the subsidy alone was not enough. He commented that Malawi must harness its water resources for both domestic food production and agricultural exports. Tembo agreed with the Ambassador that if exportable commodities were produced, private infrastructure development would likely follow. Tembo said he will also advocate for improved education and expanded job opportunities in urban

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areas to drive development. He said he was particularly impressed with the development of China and India, and would use the countries as models for Malawi.

Actions Speak Louder than Words

¶6. (C) Comment: Tembo remains sharp-witted, opinionated, and well-versed on regional and international issues. Tembo's claims to the contrary, however, the MCP convention confirmed the party still has not emerged from the age of "big-man" politics in Malawi. There is still no one within his party who is willing to contradict his views. The glimpse he offered into his campaign platform echoes the goals of President Mutharika (ref A), leaving Tembo with only his battle against rule of law violations to differentiate his candidacy. Given Tembo's own history as the right-hand of dictator Kamuzu Banda, Malawi's former president-for-life, it will take more than just words to convince voters outside of the central region that he has truly reformed into a defender of democracy and fighter of corruption. However, the MCP's failure to use their numerical superiority in the National Assembly to enact reforms over the past four years should weaken Tembo's claims.

BODDE